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GOVERNMENT A DIVINE  
INSTITUTION.

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A  
SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD  
AT ST. MARY'S,  
ON THE TWENTY-NINTH OF MAY  
M.DCC.LXV.

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BY  
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DURHAM, AND CHAPLAIN TO THE  
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M.DCC.LXVI.

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ROM. xiii. i.

*Let every soul be subject unto  
the higher powers:*

*For there is no power but of God:*

*The powers that be are ordained  
of God.*

**I**N a book containing a plain narrative of some transactions that passed in a very obscure corner of the world, together with some epistles occasionally addressed to the first scattered societies of a new and neglected religion; in a book of this nature, the production of a country which lay far removed from the seats of empire and learning, and composed chiefly by men who were of the lowest rank in this despised country: in such a book we

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find



find a better account of all moral and social duties than is any where else to be met with. A striking proof of the divinity of the gospel ! For since it had its origin amongst a people hidden from the beams of human wisdom and human glory, that truth which shines in it with a lustre far surpassing the brightest works of human genius, must be derived from a fountain of diviner light. It must have been “ the Lord  
 “ of heaven and earth, who, hiding  
 “ these things from the wise and prudent, hath revealed them unto babes.”

This superiority of the gospel is not confined merely to the circle of private and moral virtues, but extends alike to public. A few lines of an apostle furnish us with deeper and more valuable political truths than we can ever extract from philosophy, were we to drain all its sources. They shew us the true foundation and end of government, and strengthen the bands which hold its different parts together,  
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in a manner which shames the pride of systems.

It will not be thought foreign to the occasion of this solemnity to enlarge on this subject, to enter a little farther into this system of sacred politics, and to draw forth some of the important truths which it contains, either by way of explanation or inference.

The apostle lays down, as the basis of his reasoning, this general and fundamental principle, that "there is no power but of God." All who acknowledge a God must admit, that God is the fountain of all power, and that from him all created power must be derived. From this general principle, which cannot be controverted, this consequence is clearly deduced, that all the powers of government, all the powers exerted in forming, regulating, and strengthening society, are derived

from God: "the powers that be are  
"ordained of God."

The Creator hath imparted to the human race a certain measure of power and abilities. This divine gift it is their duty to improve, and to employ it to the ends for which it was given, their own happiness, and the good of others. It therefore becomes their duty to place themselves in such a situation as may give them an opportunity of improving and exerting these abilities to this beneficial end. But the degree of improvement to which these abilities can be carried in a state of dispersion and solitude, is very small. It is only in a social state that they can be brought to any considerable degree of perfection.

That power which is originally distributed amongst individuals in small proportions, is by combination multiplied and increased, as far as their union  
can

can be carried. But the mere combination of power in itself creates only a brute force: which without a right direction, may be destructive as well as beneficial. It is necessary that the public force should be directed for the public good. There must be a combination of wisdom as well as of power. Hence the necessity of legislation. The public wisdom works on those materials which hitherto had only strength without beauty or order, and forms the rude mass into a structure of fair proportions. As the stone lying on the surface of the earth differs from the stone worked into a building, so differs the individual man unconnected with others, from the same individual acting in a social state. A single stone, whatever may be its solidity, or the beauty of its polished surface, can be of no great value; but when fitted and framed with many others into an useful building, it forms the solid foundation, strengthens the lofty pillar, or connects the expanded arch. No less is the difference between  
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the individual and the social man. He who in a state of dispersion would find full exercise for all his abilities in his own personal defence, is lifted in society far above all personal concerns. He now acts for thousands, he works on some extensive plan of public utility, he becomes the support of a state, and presides like a guardian angel over the public weal.

The rudiments of society which nature itself hath laid in families, are now made to open and expand. Those first and tenderest affections, which in a state of savage nature were liable to be violated by every rude and barbarous hand, are now enclosed within other wide-spreading affections, and thereby secured from violence. Domestic and kindred love are embraced and strengthened by the love of our country.

Innocence here finds protection, all the gentler qualities are brought forward, and the milder virtues flourish  
in

in safety ; whilst the rougher and more hardy, now civilized, are employed in their defence and patronage.

Every private virtue is now employed for the general advantage. Virtue becomes the public property, and is invested with public power. Whilst vice alone remains with all the weakness of the individual, and is left exposed to public hatred and open persecution.

Even selfishness is now made to act for the public good. Because no one can pursue his own advantage without promoting at the same time that of the public. Industry and abilities, though stimulated only by self-interest, become a public benefit. All useful arts are promoted and improved ; commerce is extended ; and the public is enriched and strengthened. Those small streams which flow at first for private good only, unite in their course, and fill at length the tide of public and national prosperity.

It

It is not the least advantage of that order which prevails in a well regulated society, that all its members have their peculiar use. Hence the whole public business is carried on with more expedition and success. Every branch of art is brought to its highest degree of cultivation. Genius released from other cares bends its whole force to the cultivation of truth, and reaps its harvests in every field of science.

Government then is a divine institution, because it is the clear and natural result of laws established by the author of our nature. Human nature seeking its own happiness and improvement, finds them no where but under laws and government. All our good qualities in a savage state would be stifled and oppressed long before they came to maturity, whilst our evil ones would spread and luxuriate. Virtue would by no means be able to contend with vice, if they stood single. Virtue therefore takes refuge in the bulwark of laws,



laws, whilst vice is left to maintain itself as it can by its own strength and subtlety.

“ The powers that be” are thus ordained of God.

The apostle’s expression is general and comprehensive ; “ the powers that be.” It cannot therefore be confined merely to the government under which he himself lived, or to those forms of government only which subsisted in his own time : much less can it be confined to any one species of government, or to any single kind of authority and rule, to the exclusion and proscription of all others. Neither yet doth it sanctify usurpation, by supporting the claim of any one who may by violence seize on authority to which he hath no right, and be for a while in possession ; as if the powers that happen at any time to exist, however confessedly usurped, were ordained of God.

Am

All the different forms of government spring up alike from those seeds of power which the Almighty hath scattered amongst his creatures. They all result from the same universal Law of the public good, and rise on the same foundation of divine appointment. Power is naturally moulded into different forms, as circumstances and conjunctures give it a different determination.

The simplest forms of government naturally took place in the earliest ages. The more complex were the effect of caution and long experience, and were invented and applied to guard against the inconveniencies which had been felt from those simpler forms.

Mankind are not restricted by the force of the apostle's doctrine from making improvements in government. They are only with-held from such changes as tend to corrupt and destroy it. For the same considerations which shew that government in general is the appoint-

appointment of heaven, shew that it must be agreeable to the same divine appointment to improve every form of government. Because if our powers are to be put into a state of improvement, they ought to be put into the best state.

If amendments in government are supposed not to be conformable to the divine appointment, because they are deviations from that plan which was before allowed to be of divine appointment, then must we recur back to the first form of government, and our obedience to the ordinance of God would depend on the solution of a very doubtful question, namely, what was that original form? And even supposing this knowledge to be recovered, yet till we could bring things back to their first state, and new model the world, we must suppose more than half the world to live in open rebellion against the ordinance of God.

These



These opinions are visionary and unnatural. All human institutions must be changeable. Government is in its own nature a fluctuating thing, and cannot long remain fixed to any certain point. And therefore we may be sure that the appointment of heaven doth not require in it that permanency and stability of which man is not capable, nor renders every change in what is naturally changeable, a violation of the divine laws. It is the duty of mankind to maintain themselves in a social state, that they may enjoy all the blessings which belong to society. In order to obtain this purpose of heaven, and provide for the happiness of mankind, God hath nowhere prescribed any particular form, or laid down any invariable model of society, but hath left it wholly to their own wisdom and experience to frame for themselves such a constitution as their own particular exigencies and situation may require. Hence government hath always received various modifications in different ages and  
under

under different situations: and that model which was in its first state extremely artless and rude, hath in its progress received various additions, and hath been finished with all the refinements of the most skilful policy. And so far are we from having any grounds to affirm that these improvements are contrary to the will of heaven, that whoever hath bestowed any serious reflection on the events of history must perceive, that Providence hath plainly presided in the formation and growth of states; and hath assisted in leading them through a gradual course of improvement, by conducting human affairs to such an issue as man's wisdom could never have contrived. Often hath the prosperity of a state been brought about by means which seemed to threaten only its destruction. And often have the liberties of a people been in the event established by those measures which usurpation or tyranny had planned to enslave them.

B

He

He who bids the infant vessels to expand, and by an unseen aid leads the miniature form to the proportion and strength of manhood. He it is who rules the growth of states, and brings to maturity the first imperfect rudiments of government. The strength which he imparts, becomes in both cases the strength of man; and man is accountable for his use and application of it.

There is, through the whole duration of states, a perpetual struggle between the virtuous and the wicked. The virtuous labour continually against all the efforts of the wicked and licentious to the contrary, to maintain the public good, and to apply the public strength and power to those purposes for which they were bestowed by Providence. As these powers in their turns prevail, the state rises, fluctuates, or declines. Providence in the mean time favours the cause of virtue, by seasonable dispensations of public blessings or public



public calamities: giving success to virtue, or making it glorious even in adversity; loading with a curse prosperous wickedness, marking it in the end with some signal disgrace, and making even its success ruinous: bringing a corrupt people to despair, and when they are humbled and amended by distress, raising them again to glory by some strange revolution: but if they can no longer be reformed by calamities, leaving them to that destruction which their own corruption will certainly bring on, and abandoning them to that severe vengeance which vice, whether national or private, never fails to take upon itself.

It is necessary to make a distinction here between the powers of government, and the person who may be invested with that power. It is the power which Saint Paul tells us is ordained of God. He affirms nothing of the person. His meaning therefore cannot be, that every magistrate is ele-

vated to the high station which he possesses by the express designation of heaven; though we cannot doubt, that some chosen men have, in times of difficulty, been raised up immediately by the hand of heaven, and invested with power to carry on some extraordinary work of Providence.

Upon the whole then the apostle's doctrine is, that government is a divine institution, as resulting immediately from those laws of our nature, which the Creator himself hath established, and as being the necessary means of carrying into effect the purpose of heaven for the improvement of our nature, and the happiness of mankind: and consequently that every form of government arising on these general principles, and adapted to answer these gracious purposes of Providence, stands on this foundation of an heavenly ordinance; and every power that is duly established, THE CONSTITUTION OF EVERY COUNTRY, BECOMES A SACRED THING,

THING, which it is the duty of all degrees of men to maintain, and to guard from profane violation.

In what hath been hitherto advanced it hath been supposed that the end of this divine institution of government is the public weal : and I have presumed it to be the best proof of its divine institution, to shew that it is calculated to promote this end. The apostle supposes the same, as will manifestly appear from a bare recital of some verses following the text. “ For rulers, says he, are  
 “ not a terror to good works, but to the  
 “ evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid  
 “ of the power? Do that which is  
 “ good, and thou shalt have praise of  
 “ the same. For he is the minister of  
 “ God to thee for good. But if thou  
 “ do that which is evil, be afraid ; for  
 “ he beareth not the sword in vain : for  
 “ he is the minister of God, a reven-  
 “ ger, to execute wrath upon him that  
 “ doeth evil.”



Words cannot express more strongly than these do the benevolent intention of government, nor shew more clearly that it is the duty of the magistrate to patronize and encourage good works, and to suppress and punish the evil.

Without dwelling longer on a point so evident, I shall proceed by clear inferences from the doctrine of the apostle, to refute some dangerous and fundamental errors which have been advanced on this important subject.

In the first place then, some have strained this doctrine of a divine appointment to a most extravagant height, and have pleaded the divine right of magistracy in defence of tyranny. They have supposed that all human institutions must give way before heaven's vicegerent, and that all established laws must bend before Him whose will is the supreme law. They have supposed him to be the minister of God in such a sense as annihilates all the rights of the people,

people, or makes them only the grants of imperial bounty: in a word, they have supposed the people themselves to be made only for his pleasure.

But the very doctrine of the divine institution of government, overthrows this opinion of the divine right of the magistrate when so far extended. For if government be divinely instituted for the public good, then he by whom government is administered can only be divinely appointed, so far as he promotes the end of that institution. If he directly opposes it, his pretensions to a divine appointment confute themselves, and become vain and impious; because he acts in direct contradiction to that which is confessedly a divine appointment.

Government is an institution of universal extent and perpetual obligation, of equal force in all ages and countries. Magistrates, individual magistrates, are called upon in succession to assist in car-

rying on this great and universal work of government. And it is from their being employed in this great work, that the sacredness of their characters is derived. It is the greatest inconsistency therefore to suppose that any particular governor should have a commission to oppose the general tendency of government ; and that a partial law should be given, to contradict the universal law of the whole system.

The system of government laid down by the apostle, is the most great and generous that can be conceived. By making the public weal the end of government, it secures alike the happiness of all ranks of men that enter into it ; and the rights of the people become a part of the constitution no less essential than the rights of the magistrate. There cannot be a nobler part, or a more amiable character, than that which the inspired writer assigns to the magistrate. “ He is the minister of God “ to his people for good.” And whilst  
he



he makes the public good his care, establishing his throne on the happiness of his people, collecting around it the virtuous and the worthy, and driving from his favour the profligate and the base; superior to others more by his benevolence than his power, and studying only to employ that public strength, with the direction of which he is entrusted, to the public good: he then merits the high title of Minister of God, the Dispenser of blessings from heaven to his people.

But if on the contrary he makes his power subservient only to his own ambition; if he trampleth on the rights of his people, and endeavours to erect his throne on the ruins of their liberty; if he gathers round him only the profligate and the base, reducing all merit to a ready compliance with his own lawless desires; if he wholly perverts the ends of government, turning that into a curse which was intended by heaven for a blessing, bearing the sword against  
virtue,

virtue, and becoming a terror to good works, and not to the evil: there remains only one sense in which he can be reputed the minister of God, as he may be classed with tempests, inundations, and earthquakes; he may still be an instrument of heaven employed as the scourge of a profligate nation, and may have been raised up to despoil of their liberties, a people who are no longer worthy of them.

Every degree of power conferred upon mankind from the highest to the lowest order in society, is a trust committed to them by heaven. Man's free-agency naturally implies a *power* of abusing this trust. But it is impious to assert, that man hath a *right* to abuse this trust even in its lowest degree: and as the trust is enlarged, the abuse must be more detestable in the sight of God, and ought to be so in the sight of man. If you attempt to justify *public* acts of oppression and violence, because the power by which they are committed is  
derived

derived from God, the same reason will justify every act of *private* violence, and render opposition to it equally unlawful. Because the power of the lowest criminal is as much the gift of God as that of the highest. In both cases, the consideration that the power comes from God, is the strongest reason that can be conceived for employing it to good and benevolent purposes, and the severest condemnation of those who employ it otherwise. Stronger and more severe in the case of public than of private power; because the power was given to be a more diffusive good, and is perverted into a more spreading evil.

If you plead in defence of tyranny, that the power comes from God, tell us then from whom come the peoples rights and liberties, from whom comes every blessing of which the tyrant would despoil them, from whom comes their power of opposing tyranny?

If



If finally you plead in defence of tyranny, that the scriptures have no where prescribed resistance to it, it is sufficient to reply to sophistry like this, that whenever the tyrant can justify oppression by the authority of scripture, the people will not fail to vindicate their opposition to it by the same authority. In the mean time if any thing is clear, it seems to be clear both on the principles of reason and scripture, that a malevolent power, a power of doing evil, may, and ought to be resisted; that he who employs his authority to the worst of purposes, cannot be that minister of God, to whom our obedience is required under the severest penalties, and that it must be lawful to resist him, who abusing and perverting the powers of government, doth himself manifestly resist the wise and benevolent ordinance of God.

But whilst some have attempted to raise the magistrate to a state of absolute independence on the people, others  
have

have affected to consider him merely as their creature. But if government is not subject to the arbitrary will of one man, neither is it subject to the will of thousands. If we hold the benefits of society only by the changeable will of the multitude, we hold them by a precarious tenure indeed. The doctrine of the apostle guards against both extremes. By representing government as a divine institution, he secures it at once against tyranny and popular madness. If the magistrate is obliged to keep continually in view that great end for which government was appointed, the people are no less under the power of the same obligation. Every member of the community, each in his several station, is obliged to second and support the views of the magistrate for the public good. In vain indeed would be the vigilance of the magistrate, in vain his utmost efforts for the public good, if this were not the case, if the people were at liberty at any time to desert or to oppose him.

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The clear truth is, that government being the appointment of God, lays all who belong to it under the strongest mutual obligations. That which was before a confused mass of people clashing with each other, in pursuit of a thousand discordant aims, is hereby reduced into a regular body, and receives one general direction. The members of this body have necessarily different offices, but all of equal use and importance. These offices are so far from interfering, that they depend on, and naturally support each other; and every part whilst it performs its proper functions, contributes to the strength and stability of the whole frame. The strength of the community, by which the operations of government are to be carried on, lies in the body of the people. The conduct of this strength belongs to the magistrate; and if he is bound to direct this public strength aright, the people are bound on their part to yield to his direction. In carrying on the work of government, the  
concur-



concurrence of all is necessary. And whoever deserts or opposes this salutary work, and in any part weakens or dissolves the bands of that frame, which was constructed in conformity to the divine will, he puts his hand to the destruction of that which was intended by God to be an instrument of order and happiness amongst mankind, and leads the way to confusion and every evil work. Justly therefore is an attempt so big with ruin to mankind, represented by the apostle as an act of impiety against God: "whosoever resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God." And justly are all deterred from it by a prospect of the most dreadful penalty: "they that resist, shall receive to themselves damnation."

The conclusion arising from these evangelical principles of government, with respect to ourselves, is, that all ranks amongst us should unite in pursuing the just and divinely appointed ends

ends of government, and in securing and enjoying the advantages of our own peculiar form.

How much did the establishment of so excellent a constitution cost our great forefathers ! And with what constancy and intrepidity must they have stood to settle it on so firm a foundation, amidst the perpetual struggles of arbitrary power and popular licentiousness ! Liberty with a jealous eye watched over the progress of her work, and called forth her sons to oppose their patriot bosoms by turns against the dangers on either hand ; whilst at one time the maxims of absolute dominion, and a superiority to all laws, were planted by abject flattery near the throne : and at another popular fury prevailed, our unhappy country was overspread with all the miseries of intestine war, and civil rage embrued its hand in a sovereign's blood : till one daring and ambitious spirit arose, who taking advantage of the distracted times, led an infatuated people tamely to submit

mit their necks to the yoke of despotic power, whilst they vainly grasped the shadow of liberty, and were deluded with the name only of a commonwealth. They awoke at last from the power of this delusion, and as one man opened their arms to receive an exiled sovereign. They restored him, they restored themselves; whilst it was yet in their power, to their antient birth-rights. The constitution was again placed on its true foundation: liberty again wrought on the excellent model: and a few essays more brought it to that perfection in which we have the happiness to behold it.

Our constitution embracing in its form the will and assent of all, and equalling in its height the sublimest monarchy, unites within itself the advantages of all other forms. Our political structure, erected on the basis of public liberty, and rising gradually from the lowest classes of the people, over which its broad foundation is extended;



tended, through all the intermediate ranks, till it terminates in the crown, is calculated at once for strength and beauty, and stands firm and graceful as the unshaken pyramid.

But whilst we admire its present form, whilst we tremble at the dangers which it hath already past, and recal with veneration the memory of its great deliverers, all these considerations join to encrease our guilt, if we abuse the blessings which we inherit, or neglect to convey the inheritance to our posterity. If instead of that union which is necessary for the support of our constitution, we fall into a state of opposition and mutual resistance, and forgetful of the common good, waste that power in opposing some other rival power, which ought to be employed in the public service; if we assist in administering to the people the poison of corruption, thereby in effect weakening the hands of government, whilst we pretend to strengthen them, and diminishing

nishing its glory by debasing those over whom it rules ; or if we labour to infuse amongst the people jealousies of government, misrepresenting all its acts, spreading abroad the seeds of sedition and tumult, and misleading the vulgar by false notions of \* liberty, which according

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\* The great and excellent LOCKE, not greater and more excellent on any subject than on that of government, will give us a true idea of civil liberty. " The natural liberty of man is " to be free from any superior power on earth, " and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the laws of " nature for his rule.

" The liberty of man in society, is to be " under no other legislative power but that " established by consent in the commonwealth ; " nor under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any law, but what that legislative " shall enact, according to the trust put in " it.

" Freedom then is not what Sir ROBERT " FILMER tells us, *a liberty for every one to do " what he lists, to live as he pleases, and not to " be tied by any laws :* but freedom of men under " government, is to have a standing rule to live " by, common to every one of that society, and " made by the legislative power erected in it, a " liberty to follow my own will in all things " where that rule prescribes not ; and not to be " subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown " arbitrary

According to some, stands only for insolence to authority, and a freedom from every restraint of law : with what grief and indignation must every friend to

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“ arbitrary will of another man ; as freedom of  
 “ nature is to be under no other restraint but  
 “ the law of nature.” LOCKE on Government,  
 book ii. chap. 4.

And again, chap. vi, sec. 57. “ For law in  
 “ its true notion, is not so much the limita-  
 “ tion of a free and intelligent agent to his pro-  
 “ per interest ; and prescribes no farther than  
 “ for the general good of those under that law,  
 “ Could they be happy without it, the law as  
 “ an useless thing would of itself vanish ; and  
 “ that ill deserves the name of confinement  
 “ which hedges us in only from bogs and pre-  
 “ cipices. So that however it may be mistaken,  
 “ the end of law is not to abolish or restrain,  
 “ but to preserve and enlarge freedom. For in  
 “ all the states of created beings capable of laws,  
 “ where there is no law there is no freedom.  
 “ For liberty is to be free from restraint and vio-  
 “ lence from others, which cannot be where  
 “ there is no law : but freedom is not, as we are  
 “ told, *liberty for every man to do what he lists*,  
 “ (for who could be free, when every other  
 “ man’s humour might domineer over him ?)  
 “ but a liberty to dispose and order as he lists,  
 “ his person, actions, possessions, and his whole  
 “ property, within the allowance of those laws  
 “ under which he is, and therein not to be sub-  
 “ ject to the arbitrary will of another, but freely  
 “ follow his own.”



to his country look on ! These are circumstances which cast a cloud over those hopes which he cannot but conceive at a time when benevolence fills the throne, and power is cloathed in every gentle virtue : they give him pain for the safety of our happy constitution, even whilst the best of sovereigns enlarges his views of public good beyond his own times, and nobly endeavours to secure to our posterity those blessings which we know not how to enjoy.

Let it be observed in conclusion, that it is clearly the interest of those who are in power to support, as far as its success may depend on human support, that pure and rational religion which is taught in the gospel, and is happily established amongst us, against Enthusiasm, Infidelity, and Popish Superstition. This land hath by turns felt the malignant influence of all these powers. Long did superstition shed its thick darkness over us, and then were our kings bound in chains of iron, and  
made

made to bow the knee before a spiritual tyrant. Enthusiasm putting the mind under the power of inward impulses, sets it above all civil ordinances, and prepares the people for every act of contempt or violence against lawful authority, to which they may fancy themselves to be impelled by a divine agency. Accordingly enthusiasm presided in those times of anarchy and confusion, when majesty was derided and subjected to the most cruel indignities, when the people agitated by a fanatic fury, trampled upon the crown, and levelled all the strong-holds of government. The reign of infidelity succeeded next, and introduced amongst us that licentiousness of manners, for the sake of which only it wishes to reign. Infidelity tends directly to the destruction of government, not only by debauching the people, and sinking them, despoiled of all strength, in dissolute and unmanly pleasures; but by representing government as an institution merely human, it leaves it stripped of its dignity, and deprived of

of all those aids which it borrows from religion, to the weak support of human policy, sinking the heaven-appointed magistrate into the crafty statesman.

These dangers are past. But those enemies which have been singly defeated, seem now to be coming against us with their united forces. Infidelity, Enthusiasm, and Romish Superstition at once assail us from different quarters; and whilst they profess only to attack our established religion, all past experience must inform us, that with our established religion every other part of our happy establishment must fall.

From these dangers we have no safety but in uniting all our endeavours to establish the sublime and sacred principles of our holy religion amongst all ranks and orders of men, and praying for his blessing upon our endeavours, who was the author of our religion. These principles alone settle the authority of government upon a firm and unshaken



unshaken foundation, upon the ordinance of God. Government in that light in which Christianity, pure and uncorrupted Christianity places it, is a great and an awful design. It is a divine institution, planned by heaven for the public good: the magistrate is the minister of heaven: the people behold it with veneration: obedience becomes at once a blessing and a duty: and  
 “ we are subject not only for wrath,  
 “ but for conscience sake.”

F I N I S.



